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## Singapore: The Chinese path to political reform?

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# China Analysis

## Les Nouvelles de Chine

This section, prepared by the Asia Centre ([www.centreasia.org](http://www.centreasia.org)), draws mainly on the press in Chinese, aiming to reflect the point of view of the People's Republic of China on international questions and issues related to Greater China.

## Singapore: The Chinese path to political reform?

**Analysis by Mathieu Duchâtel based on:**

- Visit of the CPC Central Party School study group to Singapore, "The political party system in Singapore," *Xuexi shibao* (*Study Times*), n° 420, 14 January 2008.
- Visit of the Party School study group to Singapore, "The mechanisms of the fight against corruption in Singapore," *Xuexi shibao* (*Study Times*), n° 422, 28 January 2008.

In the imagination of China's leaders, Singapore evokes an idyllic world. The city-state is opulent. It ceaselessly invents new strategies to re-launch economic growth, a rarity among developed countries. Social order reigns. The future looks bright for the People's Action Party (PAP), which has ruled Singapore since its independence in 1965; there appears to be no credible threat to its monopoly on power. Often presenting the *Chineseness* of mainland China as a factor rendering it impervious to comparison with other states, the Communist Party of China prefers to look within the Chinese world, affecting open contempt for the alleged failings and frustrations of Taiwan's democracy and showing a definite interest in the Singaporean way of governance.

A study group of the Central Party School<sup>(1)</sup> reporting its findings on a trip to Singapore can scarcely contain its admiration for the city-state. From its observations, the study group draws two implied recommendations for the reform of politics in China: electoral procedures without democracy can boost political stability if the system of parties is geared toward it; and the fight against corruption can be effective without the checks provided by the ballot box and freedom of the press in the West.

According to the Party school, Singaporeans have clearly grasped that Western-style multiparty democracy with a revolving door to power contributes to instability and is thus incompatible with "national characteristics" (*guoqing*). The city-state has therefore created a system in which one party exercises power over the long term, while allowing the coexistence of other parties. This helps avoid the perceived Western phenomenon of an ascent to power by opportunists

or extremists favouring runaway social welfare provisions. This system is already ostensibly applied in China, where eight smaller democratic parties coexist around the Communist Party.<sup>(2)</sup> In theory the satellites play a central role in the regime's definition of itself as a system of democratic centralism (*minzhu jizhongzhi*). In reality, they act as a smokescreen with little effect on either the CPC's image or the formulation of its public policies.

In this respect, Singapore's party system is more sophisticated and effective.<sup>(3)</sup> Mainly because regular elections confirm the ruling party's grip on power and raise its legitimacy. Of course, the Central Party School report does not bother with noting the methods used by the Singapore government to retain power, which makes the regime an example of "illiberal democracy."<sup>(4)</sup> Rather, it states that the PAP makes major use of state resources to consolidate its power. But that is not the key; more noteworthy for the Chinese delegation was the process of reassurance, which lent rationality and legitimacy to the ruling party.

The Central Party School sees in the Singaporean system an acceptable model of limited separation of powers, in

1. The Central Party School, (which incidentally was led by Hu Jintao, the current party general secretary and state president, between 1993 and 2002), trains mid-career cadres for higher office. Each year, it receives 1,600 students. Its influence on the power centre is debatable. On the one hand, it has contributed key concepts, such as that of China's "peaceful rise," but on the other, its often liberal and provocative stands – sometimes echoed by *Xuexi shibao* (*Study Times*) – may not accurately reflect the CPC's ideological leanings.
2. Michal Meidan, "Petits partis démocratiques: l'éternel retour (Small democratic parties: Eternal retreat)," *China Analysis*, n° 11-12, December 2006-January 2007.
3. Singapore's law provides for the creation of new political parties; 21 are currently registered.
4. Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracies," *Foreign Affairs*, November-December 1997.

which the small parties exercise a counterweight role without threatening the dominant party. The small Singaporean parties, in the Chinese delegation's view, help satisfy the people's desire to wield some checks over the exercise of power by the majority party by creating a channel for expressing dissatisfaction towards the majority party and thus defusing anger towards it. At the end of the day, the system acts to restrain the PAP's actions and obliges it to act prudently and respect people's interests, and in return, the PAP's stranglehold on power is strengthened. Such argumentation indicates that the Chinese delegation tends to view procedural democracy as not only guaranteeing the legitimacy of the dominant party, but also facilitating long-term stability in the balance of power within the political system while exerting pressure to ensure that the majority party never forgets to put itself at the service of the nation's prosperity.

In fact, the CPC's reform options are not limited to either Western-style democracy or incremental implantation of more democratic procedures within the party. The party school's study group notes that erroneous theoretical notions have to be shed: electoral procedures don't mean democracy, and a multiparty system doesn't necessarily imply shifts in power. Rather, in the view of the study group, China has already partially implemented a system in which one party exercises monopoly power over the long term with many parties coexisting (as in Singapore), but the system needs to be consolidated so as to create, as Singapore has done, the veritable government of elites (*jingying zhiguo zhidu*) that Plato set out in his *Republic*.

Another specificity of the Singaporean system that the party school study group took to heart was the resolution of the problem of official corruption without recourse to either democracy (with the risk of loss of power for a corrupt party) or to a press that goes to town with every graft scandal. In this, the Singapore example helps counter the argument, often heard in Taiwan, that democracy and freedom of the press are the best watchdogs against corruption. The idea is that without deep political reform, and through simple administrative reform, the Communist Party could do better in its fight against endemic corruption by learning from the Singapore experience.

Singapore shows China that the fight against corruption can be conducted successfully by a strong state. For the party school study group, the Singaporean system has three characteristics that are applicable in China. Firstly, the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB, *tanwu diaochaju*), an institution with extensive powers. Directly answerable to the

prime minister, the CPIB can legally use an arsenal of surveillance and investigative measures such as shadowing, wire tapping, secret filming, or placing agents close to the suspect. The only limitations on its powers stem from the empowerment of the interior minister to oversee its investigations and deny it the right to file charges. Secondly, a system of civil servants with integrity, gained through high salaries that are paid not to encourage integrity but rather to enable the state to select people of quality (*qiangxian*). Finally, Singapore relies on an effective public communication system to educate its people and civil servants regarding the risks entailed in corruption. Applied in China, these methods could succeed without causing an upheaval, like a fine shower that humidifies noiselessly (*xiyu run wusheng*). •

• Translated by N. Jayaram

#### Glossary

guoqing	國情
jingying zhiguo zhidu	精英治國制度
minzhu jizhongzhi	民主集中制
qiangxian	搶賢
tanwu diaochaju	貪污調查局
xiyu run wusheng	細雨潤無聲